NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE WOMAN OF THE MASK

—OR—

NICK CARTER'S QUADRUPLE MYSTERY

by THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

The next instant, before the detective could gather himself, the horse had dashed away with the rider safely upon its back.

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The Woman of the Mask;

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OR,

NICK CARTER'S QUADRUPLE MYSTERY.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

MINUS FIVE THOUSAND A DAY.

The Woman of the Mask!

This expression was on every tongue in the neighborhood.

Each resident of that fashionable suburb of the city, when he arose in the morning, was in the habit of stepping out upon his porch and gazing first in one direction and then in the other, as if he could judge by the expression of the windows of the surrounding houses which one of them had been visited during the night by the Woman of the Mask.

Many of the mansions had already been entered and despoiled by the daring woman burglar, who came and went so mysteriously that there was never a trace of her left behind; who feared nothing; who cared not at all for the usual burglar-alarms, for dogs, or for the precautions taken by her intended victims to keep her out of their houses or to capture her when she entered them.

The Woman of the Mask came and went just the same. Nothing seemed to feaze her at all.

Bolts, bars, electric bells, watch-dogs, all were alike unavailing against her. She snapped her fingers metaphorically at all these.

She managed somehow, too, to make her nocturnal visits always when she was least expected. She came as silently as a shadow. She departed as silently as she appeared. If she spoke at all it was always in a strangely subdued voice, which was so nondescript in tone that there was not one among her victims who thought he could identify it if he should hear it again.

Calvert Park was, and is, an extremely aristocratic suburb of the city. It is not down on the map under that name. Very few outside the residents of the section could tell you where it is located; but once upon a time one of the Virginia Calverts had lived there for a time—and hence its name.

If you should step upon a trolley-car in the city, it would take you to Calvert Park in thirty-five minutes, and it was, in fact, located within the limits of Greater New York.

They were rich men, all of them, who lived there; the only distinguishing qualities between them being counted

in the fact that some were richer than others. They all lived in pretentiously fine houses, detached houses, with ample grounds surrounding them. The community of Calvert Park was like a club; one had to be duly elected to membership before one could "butt in" upon the sanctity of that environment. This, of course, was not true in fact, but it was in theory, and there are times when theory is stronger than fact.

The Woman of the Mask had preyed upon that community for six months, on and off, before the victims of her predatory habits really "sat up and began to take notice," and then it was discovered that eight houses had been entered and robbed in that time—rather more than at the rate of one a month.

It was when the mansion of General Hastings was entered and robbed that things came to a climax.

The general had always considered himself as rather above the ordinary things of life. It was quite comprehensive that the houses of his neighbors should be entered and robbed; but it was entirely beyond the ordinary understanding that his own residence should be made to suffer in like manner.

From his own standpoint, it was almost a sacrilege. He did not say so, to be sure; he would even have been astonished had it been said to him; but it was none the less true.

The Woman of the Mask had entered and left his house as silently as usual, only she had done rather more in her visit to the general; she had entered, robbed, and taken her departure without disturbing a soul in that great house.

More than that, she had taken things—so the general said—for which she could have no possible use, things that she could not dispose of without getting caught, things that would bring no recompense for the theft, in the markets, although they were of great value to him.

But the general was angry. His sense of dignity was outraged. His repose had been disturbed. It was all right from his viewpoint that the Woman of the Mask should rob the houses of Cuthbert, Hillis, Pemberton, and others, but it was distinctly an outrage when she should presume to enter, unannounced, the residence of General Hastings.

That was why he sent for Nick Carter.

He had not thought of it until that morning. When his friends had mentioned the fact that their residences had been entered and robbed, he had smiled grimly and said nothing; but now the thing had taken on an entirely different character. His own house had been robbed.

It was about noon when the detective arrived at Calvert Park, and went at once to the residence of the general, and there he was shown into the old warrior's private study, where he still delighted to keep his maps and charts, and where, ever since he had gone upon the retired list, he had been engaged in preparing manuscripts which were some day to be published, and which he believed would make as great a sensation as did the "Memoirs of U. S. Grant."

"Take a seat, Mr. Carter," said the old general, when the detective entered the room. "I am glad that it was convenient for you to come to me at once. I have been robbed."

"Another Calvert Park burglary?" smiled the detective.

"Calvert Park burglary!" the general snorted. "This is a General Hastings burglary, sir, and the worst of it is, that infernal woman has taken all my manuscript."

"Has taken what?" asked Nick, leaning forward, for he was surprised.

"My manuscript! My work, that I have been engaged upon for seven years. My maps! My best charts. My notes, and my manuscript."

"But of what possible value could such things be to the burglar?" asked the detective.

"That's just the point, sir! That is why I have sent for you. Personally, I would have accepted a hundred thousand dollars for the manuscript, the maps and charts, but intrinsically they are not worth their weight in common wrapping-paper. All the same, that infernal woman has taken them."

"You have said 'infernal woman' twice. I suppose you refer to the Woman of the Mask?"

"Who else?"

"Did you see her?"

"No."

"Did anybody see her or talk with her? She sometimes lets herself be seen and does a little talking as well."

"She did neither in this case. She came and went like a shadow. We had no idea that the house had been entered until it was opened this morning. The woman was not heard at all in the night. We have no idea what time she was here, more than conjecture."

"What else was stolen besides the manuscripts and the maps?"

"Oh, some jewels, some silverware, some gold plate, and some cash; but she is welcome to all that if she will only return——"

"How much value have you lost in the other articles, general?"

"I don't know. I have not figured it. My wife lost a valuable diamond necklace. My eldest daughter, who happens to be visiting us at present, lost some jewels. The butler can tell you about the other things that were stolen. I have paid no attention to their talk about it. What I wish you to recover for me are the things that were taken from this study. All the rest can go to grass, sir!"

"How was the house entered?" asked the detective.

"I don't know."

"Have you inquired?"

"Naturally. Nobody knows a thing about it. When Simpson opened up this morning, he found things as usual. He had no idea that there had been a robbery until later. There were evidences enough of it in the dining-room and in the butler's pantry."

"But this room is the only one to which you have given any personal attention, general?"

"Yes. Decidedly. I don't know why I did it, but the moment I heard there had been a robbery, I hastened to this room and discovered what I had lost here. From that moment I have paid no attention to the complaints of the other. Jewels and silverware and goldware can be replaced. I can write a check for such things as that; but I can't write a check for my mauscripts, sir! I cannot replace them with mere dollars."

"I don't know about that," replied the detective. "It is possible that the burglar had the idea in view that you could do so when they were taken."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let us hope that the burglar intends in the future to communicate with you and to offer terms whereby the return of your manuscript would be assured on payment of a certain sum by you."

"Eh? Do you think that?"

"I cannot imagine any other reason why they should have been taken at all."

"Let us hope, Mr. Carter, that the proposal will be made," said the general, smiling now for the first time since the detective entered the room.

"Do you mean, general, that you would accept such an offer, and pay out money for the return of your stolen articles?"

"I assuredly do."

"But that would be compounding a felony."

"I don't care a continental what it would be. I want those manuscripts back again. What do I care for a few dollars, more or less. I am a rich man. You know that. I could not spend my income, let alone my capital, in the few years that are left to me to live. I am long past seventy years old. Look here, Carter, if you think that that infernal woman——"

"Ho do you know that it was the woman?"

"Never mind that part of it, then. If you think that the burglar is likely to write to me and make any such offer as you suggest, we'll just lie on our oars, so to speak, for a while and wait. I tell you quite frankly that I would cheerfully give fifty thousand dollars for the return of that manuscript, and no questions asked."

"Then I suppose you would quite as cheerfully give that amount to the man who would recover the stolen articles for you, eh?"

"Quite. Wait; I'll do even better than that."

"Well?"

"If you find the manuscripts, the maps and charts, and, in short, the things that were taken from this particular room, before twelve o'clock to-night, and return them to me unharmed and complete, I will give you a hundred thousand dollars for your trouble. Before to-morrow night, at the same hour, the reward will be reduced to ninety-five thousand; the next day, it will be ninety, and so on, like that. What do you say?"

"You mean that you will deduct five thousand dollars from the amount of the reward each twenty-four hours?"

"Yes; only you have got to agree to work out the twenty days before you abandon the search. If you don't find the stuff till the last day you will receive only five thousand dollars; if the day before the last, ten thousand, and so on. How do you like it?"

"It sounds all right."

"Well, go ahead then. Find that infernal woman! Get back my manuscript and the other articles. The quicker you do it the better you will be paid, and don't spare expense, for I will stand that part of it, no matter how it turns out."

"All right, general," said the detective. "Now, I want you to reply to a few questions, if you please."

CHAPTER II.

THE MISSING MANUSCRIPT.

"We will confine ourselves to what occurred in this room, if you please," said the detective. The general nodded.

"Yes" he said. "That is the only part of the affair that interests me."

"Who made the discovery that this room had been entered at all?"

"I did. I am the only one who ever enters it, save only when I call somebody here, or send my secretary for something."

"Is the door of the room kept locked during your absences from it?"

"No; it isn't necessary."

"Why not?"

"For the reason that the entire household is aware that immediate dismissal is the penalty for entering here without express permission."

"Are there no exceptions to that rule?"

"None whatever."

"Now, tell me in what condition you found the room when you entered it this morning."

"I found it in the usual condition. There was no evidence here that anybody had entered the room since I left it. Everything was the same as usual. I could not see that anything had been disturbed."

"Then you did not know at once that your manuscript had been disturbed?"

"No."

"Tell me just how you made the discovery."

The general was seated in a revolving-chair at the opposite side of the desk—a huge, square, flat one—from the detective. Now he leaned forward and pulled open a drawer at his left.

"Look here," he said, and Nick rose and walked around the table. "I keep my manuscript in this drawer; that is, the finished manuscript; that which I have finally revised and corrected, and which I consider to be ready for the printer. In this drawer"—and he opened another one, just above it—"I put the sheets as I write them, the last page on top—so. Here"—he pulled open the lowest drawer on that side, a deep one—"I have been in the habit of keeping my reference maps and charts, many of them made by myself and which are, therefore, impossible to replace."

Nick nodded.

"I mean that I keep in this drawer such maps and charts as I am at the time using constantly."

He closed the drawer and leaned back in his chair again.

"In the drawers on the other side, on my right, I keep my blank manuscript paper, and the maps, charts, references, and notes which I am likely to want. I never permit my work to litter the top of my desk. When I stop working for the day, I always gather everything together, and put things where they belong. When I stopped work last night, or rather yesterday, in the afternoon, I put the things away as I have described, and therefore, when I entered the room this morning, knowing that the house had been entered and robbed during the night, I had no idea that this study had also been visited. But, when I came to my desk and pulled open a drawer, more from force of habit than because I suspected that anything might be missing, I nearly dropped in my tracks to discover that the drawer was empty. It did not take me long after that to open the remaining drawers, and with the result that I found every one of them empty. The burglar had taken everything that pertains to my work; the completed manuscript, the unrevised manuscript, the maps, charts, notes—EVERYTHING!"

"And was nothing else in the room disturbed?"

"Not a thing."

"Was there no evidence here, anywhere else, that the room had been visited?"

"Not a bit, that I could discover, then or now."

"The thief must have known, then, something about your habits, general; don't you think so, sir?"

"It would seem so."

"Have you any idea of any person who is sufficiently interested in your work to wish to possess it?"

"No; certainly not to steal it."

"Or to have it stolen?"

"No."

"Merely in order that it might never be published, if for no other reason?"

The general was thoughtful, but at last he replied emphatically:

"No; there is no such person. That is not the secret of this outrage."

"What, in your opinion, is the secret of it, general?"

"I believe you hit it the first time you made a guess; it is something in the nature of ransom money. I believe I will hear, presently, that my manuscript will be returned to me on payment of a certain sum of money. The thief must have known——"

"Precisely. That is what I am getting at. The thief did know just how highly you valued your work upon which you have been so long engaged. More, the thief knew perfectly well in what place that work was kept. The thief was able to enter this room, take the work and the things that go with it, and walk off quietly without disturbing anything else; that is, without the necessity of making a search."

"By gracious, it does look like that!"

"I would like to ask you if the burglar displayed an equally intimate knowledge of the other parts of this house, as of this room?"

"I believe so, now that you speak of it. It would seem so from the fact——"

"Well?"

"That in each case the thief seemed to know exactly where to go in order to possess certain articles of value; seemed to know exactly how to get at those articles with the least possible trouble, and how to make off afterward with them without difficulty. I understand what you are getting at, Mr. Carter."

"That the Woman of the Mask is some person who has the entree to your house and to the other houses in this community?"

The old general nodded vehemently.

"The Woman of the Mask is one of our own set. That goes without saying, now. I see it very plainly."

"Is this the first time that anything has been stolen from your house, general?"

"Yes."

"Did I understand you to say that you did not know how the burglar entered or left the house?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me exactly what you mean by that?"

"I mean that no window was forced open; no door had been broken in; no entrance had been forced anywhere, that I could find."

"Was the house safely locked against intrusion, for the night?"

"I suppose so. I don't know. The butler attends to that duty."

"Call him here, general. But first, one word more. Is your house provided with burglar alarms?"

"No."

"Or with extra precautions of any kind against intrusion?"

"No. I have never thought such a thing necessary. It never occurred to me that my own house would be robbed, even while all the houses around me were being entered."

"Some of your neighbors have seen this Woman of the Mask, I have heard?"

"Yes; several of them."

"And heard the sound of her voice. Can you tell me who they are?"

"Cuthbert, Hillis, Pemberton—and the Coopers, I think."

"Have you heard them describe the woman?"

"No; that is, I haven't paid attention."

"By the way, general, before you ring for Simpson, there is one more thing in reference to your work. Do you work here in this room alone? Do you do all your writing yourself?"

"No. I did until recently—I say recently, but I should say between six months and a year ago. But then I began to discover that I am not as young as I used to be. I found that my hand was not as steady as formerly, and that it troubled me to write long at a time. I found that the physical strain retarded the mental faculties."

"I see. So you took a secretary?"

The general laughed.

"I had one right here, ready at hand all the time, and did not know it until one day I happened to mention the subject."

"How is that? Or, rather, who is it?"

"My niece; that is, my wife's niece. I think it was while we were at dinner one day when I made the remark that I would have to get a secretary, and Erlina said that she would do the writing for me. She began at once. She has been at it ever since, and now I don't know how I should get along without her—although she is trying at times."

"Does she assist you every day, general?"

"Yes; from ten to twelve, and from two to four each day, since something less than a year ago."

"And now will you tell me a general word or two about the members of your household?"

"Do you mean the immediate household, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes."

"Well, there's my wife, my son Henry—he is a bachelor, and although forty years old, still lives at home with us—my daughter, Mrs. Sanderson, who is at present visiting us. Her home is in London. She married an Englishman, an army officer; fine fellow, too. Then there are Isabel and Erlina."

"Who are they, please?"

"Isabel is my ward. She is the daughter of Captain Acton, an old comrade of mine, who married late in life, became a widower within a year, and died three years later, leaving his daughter to me. She is like my own daughter, or rather more like a grandchild, for she is still a girl."

"And Erlina?"

"Erlina Acosta is my wife's niece. One of her sisters married a Spaniard or a Portuguese, I'm not sure which it was. Erlina was the result of that marriage. She was left an orphan five years ago and she came to us. What the devil do you want of all this family history?"

"I am trying to determine in my mind which one of the family will be most capable of assisting me in my search for the thief; the brightest, the smartest, the——"

"Well, it would be a toss-up between the two girls, I reckon. They are about the same age. Isabel is a trifle the elder of the two, I think. Shall I send for them? Would you like to have a talk with them? How the blazes do you expect either of those hairbrained creatures to assist you in a matter of this sort, anyhow?"

"I don't know yet. I want everybody to assist me. No, you need not send for them just yet; but you may ring for Simpson, if you will. I would like to talk with him about the windows and doors. After that I will talk with the other members of the household."

"As you like."

The general pressed an electric-button and a moment later Simpson appeared.

"Come in, Simpson," said Nick. "I want you to tell me in as few words as possible all that you know about the burglary. I would like to find out first, for example, how the thief entered the house. Do you know?"

"There is only one way, sir," was the immediate reply. "The thief must have come in through the front door, with a key. There is no other way in which entrance could have been obtained, without breaking open something."

CHAPTER III.

THE ROBBERY AT CUTHBERT'S.

Careful investigation and thorough questioning proved that Simpson was correct about this. It was one of his duties to attend to locking the house at night, and this he always did with thoroughness. The night of the robbery he had paid his usual care to the duty and had assured himself that everything was secure, for even if his master did not stand much in awe of the Woman of the Mask, Simpson did.

He knew of the other robberies. Servants discuss such things among themselves, and he had talked about the affairs with servants of each house where a robbery had occurred; for at Calvert Park all the servants were known to one another, and were in their own way as socially inclined as their employers.

The result of Nick's questions was that the burglar,

whether man or woman, had either entered the house with a key which fitted the front door, or had been already inside the house when it was closed.

When he was through with Simpson and would have discussed the matter with the young ladies, he found that they had gone out for a drive and would not be at home till late in the afternoon, and so he decided that he would call upon the others who had suffered from the predatory habits of the Woman of the Mask.

We need not go into these calls in detail. He called first upon Mr. Cuthbert, who was the last one to suffer before the descent upon the house of the general.

Cuthbert's story was to the effect that he had been awakened in the night, while asleep in his bed, to discover that the Woman of the Mask was standing over him with a pistol leveled at his head; and she had said to him, quite calmly:

"You brought eleven thousand five hundred dollars in cash home with you to-night. You will oblige me and spare yourself some injury if you will tell me where it is. I have need of it."

He had started to rise from the bed, but she had stepped quickly backward and away from him, and had said coolly:

"If you attempt resistance in any form, I will not hesitate to add the crime of murder to my misdeeds. Lie back against your pillow and lock your fingers behind your head."

There was something about her which compelled obedience. He obeyed her.

"I am not a coward, Mr. Carter," he told the detective. "I have faced loaded pistols many times, and under many different circumstances, in my younger days. But that woman had what you call the drop on me. I knew from the way she spoke that she meant what she said. I have not the least doubt at this moment that I if had made any attempt at resistance, she would have shot me with the same calmness that she awakened me from my sleep."

"You told her where the money was?" asked Nick.

"I certainly did. I would do it again, too. It was a question of my money or my life. I gave up the shekels, that's all."

"Where was the money? Was it in that same room with you?"

"Yes; locked in a small steel box that I keep in my room. The key was in a pocket of my trousers. I told her so."

"What was done then?"

"She tossed the trousers to me on the bed and ordered me to select the key for her. I did so. There was a funny thing about that incident, too. There were several funny things about it, in fact, but this one was really strange."

"What was it?"

"Well, I remembered that I also had a loaded revolver locked inside the steel box with the cash, so when I had found the key I told her if she would pass the box to me I would open it for her and give her the money.

"'Thank you,' she said. 'I will ask you to give me the key; nothing else.' Then she put the box on the bed, but keeping it out of my reach, and opened it. She did not make any comment about the pistol that was there, but she acted exactly as if she had known all along that it was there."

"Are you in the habit of keeping such an amount of money in cash in the house?" asked the detective.

"I don't think it has happened half a dozen times in my life."

"What was the occasion of your having it there at that particular time?"

"It was a sum that I received that afternoon, in payment for a small piece of land I had just sold."

"A transaction which she seemed to know all about. She knew the exact sum, eh?"

"Not the exact sum. That is, the sum was eleven thousand five hundred and fifty dollars. The amount she named was eleven thousand five hundred."

"It was near enough for the purpose."

"Quite."

"From whom did you receive it? From one of your neighbors?"

"No; a man who lives in——"

"It doesn't matter, as long as it was not one of your neighbors. Now, tell me something about the woman herself."

"There isn't anything that I can tell you about her, save that I think she is young."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, I judge from general appearances. She has the figure of a young woman. She has the manner of one. She holds her head as if she were young; she walks as if she were young."

"What about her voice?"

Mr. Cuthbert shook his head.

"I couldn't tell you anything about her voice," he said.

"Why not? You heard it, didn't you?"

"I did and I did not. It was a disguised voice. If you ask me how I know that I will have to reply that I do not know. And she did not exactly talk, either. What she said was uttered in a half-whisper; a whisper that was not a whisper. But I would like to suggest to you right here and now that through all that scene, which did not last more than ten minutes, the Woman of the Mask constantly reminded me of somebody I know."

"Indeed! That is interesting. Have you been able to determine who?"

"No; I have not. I would have to be mighty certain about that, too, before I would give it out."

"Was anything else taken from your house that night, Mr. Cuthbert?"

"Nothing."

"Anybody else disturbed in the house?"

"Not a soul."

"How did the woman get into the house?"

"Just walked in, I suppose."

"How is that? Don't you lock your doors at night?"

"Certainly. Always, every one of them. Crawford—my butler—swears that he put the chain up inside the vestibule door that night, too; but he was mistaken about that, of course, as we found that the chain was down, and it had not been cut."

"You are satisfied that she entered that way?"

"There wasn't any other way that she could enter without breaking something."

"When she left your sleeping-room with the money in her possession, how did it happen that you did not leap from your bed and take after her?"

Cuthbert smiled grimly.

"She had provided against that," he said. "She put the key in the lock on the outer side of the door, and when she went out, she turned it and threw it on the floor in the hall. By the time I had raised a row and called some of the servants to my assistance, and by the time they had found the key where she had thrown it away, she had made good her escape."

"Should you say that she was blond or brunette or red-headed—or what?"

Cuthbert laughed again.

"The woman who robbed me was a blonde—distinctly so," he said. "The woman who robbed Hillis was red-headed, and so it goes."

"I don't understand," said the detective.

"You should. It's easy enough. She wears wigs when she starts out on her expeditions. She wore a bleached-blond wig when she made her call upon me. When she paid her respects to Hillis, it was Titian. Pemberton swears that she is a brunette. So there you are."

"What about her eyes?"

"One cannot tell what they are like, owing to the mask she wears. The eye-holes are covered with something which conceals the expression and the color of the eyes. They might be black, or blue, or green, for all I know."

"And her hands; did you see her hands?"

"Kid gloves," was the laconic answer.

"What!" exclaimed the detective. "Did she wear gloves?"

"Sure thing, Carter. Black kid gloves, with long wrists to them, but with the tips cut from the fingers."

"I see; and the remainder of her costume?"

"Black. Her clothes fit her, though. I could see that. And they did not make the slightest noise when she moved, either. You know that most women, when they move about, make a noise—a sort of rustling noise. She didn't. You couldn't hear a sound. I'm not much of a judge of fashions, but I should say that her clothes were cut à la mode, all right."

"She has a good figure, you say? How tall is she?"

"About the ordinary height. I believe there is a height for a woman which is so described, isn't there?"

"I am trying to discover if there was not something about her which individualized her; something which made her appear different from other women."

"Well"—grimly—"there was the gun; and there was the mask; and there was her presence in my sleeping-room in the middle of the night, while I was in bed. I think those things rather individualize her, do they not?"

"You know very well what I mean."

"There wasn't a thing, Carter. I studied her for all I was worth, too. The eleven thousand didn't break me, and I was sorry to lose it, and all that, but I think I was more interested in the woman herself than in what she was doing."

"Nothing else in the house was taken?"

"Not a thing."

"Weren't you impressed with the idea that she knew her way around your home too well for a stranger? And did it not strike you as remarkable that she should know all about the cash that you had in the steel box?"

"Yes—to both questions. But what good did that do? I have no idea who she was. Hollis and I have talked it over; so have Pemberton and I. We can make nothing of it. We have had the idea that the Woman of the Mask is somebody whom we know, or, at least, who knows us; but we quit right there. We talked over everybody we know who lives around here. There isn't a woman in the bunch whom we dared even to consider as a possibility in the matter."

"Naturally not. But what about the servants? Aren't there a good many lady's-maids in the neighborhood who might adopt burglary as a vocation?"

"Hardly. We canvassed them, too. We went through the whole gamut. Wrote down names and scratched them out as we discussed them; and when we had finished they were all scratched out. There was not one left."

"I would like to have seen that list, or those lists, and know which were the last names that were scratched."

"The lists are destroyed," was the quiet reply; and it was said so strangely that the detective stared.

"Perhaps," he said, "I will ask you to make a new one for me, before long—or to help me to go over one that I will prepare myself. What would you say to that?"

"At your service, my dear sir. At your service."

CHAPTER IV.

THREE BEAUTIFUL WOMEN.

The interviews that Nick Carter had with Pemberton, with Hollis, and with Cooper, were each about as productive, or rather as unproductive, as the one had with Cuthbert.

And their stories were in substance the same, also.

To each of them the Woman of the Mask had appeared suddenly and coolly; to each she had stated the purpose of her call and her wishes regarding it, and in each case she had enforced her demands at the point of a pistol, and always with that cool, calm manner of self-assurance and settled purpose which inevitably carried conviction with it.

In each case, too, she had seemed to be thoroughly posted not only in regard to the habits and possessions of the man she robbed, but concerning the interior of the house as well. It was Pemberton who assured the detective that "she new her way about quite as well as I do myself."

They all agreed that there was something distinctly familiar about her; but there their unanimity ended. It was in her manner, somehow; in the poise of her head; in the way she moved across the floor; in a gesture of the arms; not one of them could particularize about it. There was not one of them who ventured to state exactly what it was about her that reminded him of some other person.

The chief thing of interest to the detective about the robberies was the method by which the house had been entered in each case.

Always it was through the front door. Never had anything been broken.

The legal definition of burglary is "breaking and entering," and were it not for the fact that the highest court in the State has ruled that entering the house of another by the use of skeleton or duplicate keys for the purpose of robbery constitutes breaking and entering under the law, there would have been no burglary in these cases.

But burglary there was; serious burglary, too, as it appeared; for the woman's gains were considerable.

The eight robberies which had taken place within six months had netted the Woman of the Mask the very tidy sum of $120,000 in cash, to say nothing whatever of the other valuables that had been taken in the shape of jewels and ornaments, gold and silverware and miscellaneous articles.

That evening, when the detective had completed his investigations, he returned to General Hastings' house and asked him:

"How many persons know that you sent for me to come here?"

"I suppose everybody in the neighborhood knows it by this time," was the reply. "Everybody knows thoroughly everybody else's business in this neighborhood. It was probably very generally known that you were sent for, long before you arrived at my house to-day. Why?"

"I had been hoping that we might keep my connection with the case a secret."

The old general laughed immoderately.

"That could not have been done, even if we had tried it," he said. "Here, there is a Grundy in every household, who reports at once the slightest occurrence. It is then passed from mouth to ear throughout the community. If I were forty years younger than I am I would not live here; being forty years older than I would wish, it makes no difference to me."

During the evening the detective made the acquaintance of the Hastings family, already mentioned; and in doing so he encountered two surprises.

For one thing he was in no way prepared for the youth and beauty of the general's wife. The old man had said nothing to lead the detective to suppose that Mrs. Hastings was his second wife; but he found her to be less than thirty years old, and youthful in appearance at that.

She looked scarcely older than her niece Erlina, or than the adopted daughter of the general, Isabel Acton.

As Nick faced them in the drawing-room that evening he thought to himself that he had rarely seen three such beautiful women together in any company.

They were beauties of a distinct type, too. Mrs. Hastings possessed an abundance of hair of a strange, coppery color, or possibly was suggestive of beaten gold. Her eyes were of a reddish brown tint, large, luminous, full of expression, and her complexion was as fair and as smooth as a girl's.

Erlina, the niece, was distinctly of the Spanish type. Her hair—and there was a lot of it—was coal black; so were her eyes; somber black, flashing with hidden fires; restless eyes; eyes with infinite possibilities behind and beyond them.

Isabel Acton was of another type. She had large, round, innocent, baby-blue eyes that always looked upon you with a suggestion of surprise in them. We have all read about alabaster complexions, and if there are such, she had one—with the flush of life-giving blood glowing through it invitingly. Her hair might have belonged to one of Thor's goddesses. It was the real, genuine, undeniable blond which could never be mistaken or suspected of artificiality.

The three were of about the same height and figure and they certainly turned the home of the general into a suggestion of fairyland.

The old man himself spoke of them as his three graces.

"You see," he said laughingly, to the detective, "I am patriotic, even in my women. I have the red, the white, and the blue—for if you look close enough you will see a tinge of blue in the blackness of Erlina's hair."

Knowing who Nick was, the ladies professed considerable interest in what opinion he might have concerning

the Woman of the Mask, and, after a little, they grouped themselves around him with apparently eager questions about the case.

"Do tell us what you have discovered?" asked Mrs. Hastings, while the others drew nearer to hear his reply.

"I have discovered," he said slowly, "just about what you already know; no more; no less. The burglar is a woman; she is young; she is beautiful——"

"But," interjected Isabel Acton, "I thought she always wore a mask."

"So she does," replied the detective. "Nevertheless, it is the consensus of opinion that she is beautiful—and charming."

"I don't see how anybody can possibly know that—under the circumstances," insisted the young lady.

"Nothing is easier," retorted Nick. "The intuitiveness of the men she robbed. Her own infinite grace of motion. Her poise, audacity, courage, coolness, adroitness; nothing but youth and beauty could give her all those qualities."

"I suppose you intend to catch her, Mr. Carter?" said Erlina quietly.

"I certainly do," was the equally quiet reply.

"I would like to ask you how you intend to accomplish it?"

"I don't know that, Miss Acosta; but, judging from the experiences I have had with the criminal classes, I should answer that question by saying that ultimately she will catch herself. They almost always do that."

"Do they? How so?"

"Did it ever occur to you, ladies, that the very first requisite for a successful burglar—for a successful criminal of any sort—is conceit?"

They admitted that the idea had not occurred to them; and Nick continued:

"There is no doubt that the Woman of the Mask is one of you and one with you. I refer, of course, to your society, as it is recognized here at Calvert Park. Some one of the many friends you meet at each of the receptions or bridge-parties that you attend, is the Woman of the Mask."

The ladies were visibly affected by this announcement, and Nick paused long enough to let it have its effect; then he continued:

"The Woman of the Mask lives in one of the houses in the park or terms of equality—unless she is one of the maids, which is hardly conceivable. She therefore knows that I am here now, and that I have a reputation to maintain, for catching criminals as well as for success generally. She will, therefore, be inclined to lie low for a while. But after a little her natural fear of me will pass away. She will ask herself, 'Who is this Nick Carter, anyway, that I should fear him?' and she will immediately set about resuming her operations of crime. When she does that, she will walk directly into my power, and the mystery of the Woman of the Mask will be a mystery no longer. I am quite aware that all this sounds strangely like boasting, only you must understand that I do not mean it in that way at all. I am not discoursing upon my own abilities, but rather upon the weaknesses of my opponent."

"All this is very interesting, Mr. Carter." It was Erlina Acosta who spoke. "What you mean to say is, that we may all rest in security for a time, under the idea that because you are among us the Woman of the Mask will be afraid to move."

"Exactly," replied Nick, smiling.

The young woman shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

"What you say shocks me," volunteered Mrs. Hastings. "Is it possible that this burglar, who has terrified the neighborhood, is one of the women whom I call friends?"

"I think there is no doubt about it, madam."

"Dear me! I hope you will catch her very soon, then. Until you do I shall be inclined to look with suspicion upon every woman in this neighborhood."

"And has it occurred to you, madam, that the other women of the neighborhood will be doing the same?"

"Do you mean that they will be looking with suspicion upon me? Upon the ladies of this household?"

"Upon every one they meet, as you just now said you would do."

"It is really a terrible condition of affairs."

It was Mrs. Hastings' turn to shrug her shoulders and turn away; and Nick noticed that the gesture was exactly like her niece's. But the detective was now alone with Isabel Acton.

"How is it about yourself, Mr. Carter?" she asked, as soon as they were alone together.

"How do you mean?" he inquired.

"Do you, too, look with suspicion upon every woman you encounter in this neighborhood?"

"Yes, and no. Hardly that."

"Upon me, for example?"

Isabel was looking straight into the detective's eyes, and he replied to her slowly, measuring his words:

"The polite answer for me to make to your question would be to say how utterly impossible such a thing could be; but I prefer to reply by asking, Why not?"

She nodded brightly at him.

"I like that reply," she said. "Why not, indeed? If one of the women of the 'set' is the Woman of the Mask, it might as well be me as another; don't you think so?"

"Frankly—yes."

"And there are other reasons why it might be logical to suspect me more than the others."

"I don't agree with you there," replied the detective.

"Why not? I am no relation to the general. It is said that I am to be remembered in his will—but it is only a

statement. He has never told me as much, although I have reason to believe that it is so. But the fact remains that if he should die suddenly and I should not be mentioned in the will, I would be penniless; so what is more likely than that in the meantime I should take the method of the Woman of the Mask to prepare for the emergency to follow such an event?"

"You are quite right, Miss Acton; but you are not alone in the category."

"No; there is Erlina. Really, Mr. Carter, I think that your first suspicions should be directed against the people who live in this house."

And saying that she also shrugged her shoulders and turned away as the others had done, one by one; and the gestures in each case were alike; that is, they were enough alike so that the detective noticed the fact. People living in the same house will have many gestures in common, however. We adopt the mannerisms of others unconsciously.

It was the detective's turn to shrug his shoulders.

CHAPTER V.

A PUZZLING YOUNG WOMAN.

The general was correct about its being generally known that Nick Carter had been engaged to run down the mysterious burglar, and the proof of it was forthcoming before the evening was over.

By ones and twos and threes, the entire neighborhood dropped in upon the Hastings household until one might have supposed that it was a reception night; but they came informally, each desirous to meet the detective and to hear what he had to say about the Woman of the Mask.

If Nick had planned the occasion, he could not have done better, for there in the great drawing-room with him was every one of the women who might each be suspected of being the burglar.

He had an opportunity to converse with each of them, too, for all wished to be presented to him, and each one had something to say about the subject under consideration.

There were beautiful women and plain women; old women and young women and middle-aged women; and then as the impromptu party was at the point of breaking up, a Western Union messenger-boy appeared with a telegram addressed to General Hastings, which was brought to him by Simpson. It read:

"General Hastings, Colonial Club, New York City.

"One hundred thousand dollars in cash placed in the drawer from which the manuscript disappeared and left there indefinitely will result in a fair exchange.

"The Mask."

The general read the message and bit his lips thickly; but without a word he passed it to the detective, who was standing near him.

And Nick read it aloud to the gathering. Then, while they were glancing at one another, some with expressions of consternation, some with amusement, he sent for the messenger-boy to be brought before them.

To him he gave a note which he had already written, addressed to the operator. It said:

"I wish you would inquire over the wire of the office that sent the message to General Hastings, for all particulars referring to the filing of the message for transmission."

"Now, young man," he said, "hurry back to your office and return here as soon as you can with the information you are after."

And so the company remained in the general's house another hour; until the return of the messenger; and he brought with him a note which read:

"Nothing is known concerning the filing of the telegram sent to General Hastings, save that a messenger was called from the Thirty-ninth street office, Manhattan, early this morning to the Hotel York, Thirty-sixth Street and Seventh Avenue, which has no telegraph office. The messenger was given two telegrams to send. One was to be held by him and filed at ten o'clock this evening; the other was to be sent at once. He was given five dollars to pay for the two messages, and told that he might keep the change. He was especially instructed to hold the message to General Hastings until this evening, and to say nothing about it in the meantime. The other message was addressed to a firm name in Fort Scott, Kansas, and has not been delivered. It was signed 'Agnes,' and we think it was used merely as a blind for the second message. The person who called the messenger was a woman; young, well-dressed, evidently a lady in appearance and manner; but she wore a thick veil, and the messenger cannot supply a description of her."

This explicit communication was signed by the operator—and the incident was closed, so far as the telegraph company was concerned.

"I wonder," said Nick, raising his eyes from the message and looking first upon one beautiful face and then another around him, "which of you who are present here was in Manhattan, at an early hour this morning?"

There was no reply to this question, and he changed the form of it.

"Who among you has *not* been across the river to Manhattan to-day?" he asked.

There was a sound of laughter among them, and each woman present raised her right hand, after the manner of children at school; and every hand was raised.

"Good!" said the detective; and he laughed with them. "We are now assured that the woman who sent this telegram this morning, from the Hotel York, is *not* in this room at the present moment. Now, general, what are you going to do about this message?"

"What would you advise?" was the reply.

"Well, it might not be at all bad advice to suggest that you put the money in the drawer, as the message requests you to do, and that then you, or somebody else, should sit over it with a gun until the Woman of the Mask appears. I think, on the whole, that I would ignore it and await the receipt of a second message."

"Yes. I had thought of that. That is what I will do."

The detective had received several invitations to pass the night at different houses, but had decided to remain at the general's; but when the guests had departed and he had adjourned with the old gentleman to his study for a moment, he said to him:

"General, do you care to risk so great a sum as a hundred thousand dollars, in our effort to capture this [illegible]?"

"I would not hesitate a minute if I supposed it would do any good," was the instant reply.

"I think I can assure you that you will not lose the money, if you will risk it," said the detective.

"Then you wish me to follow the directions of that [illegible]?"

"Yes."

"I will have to wait till to-morrow, you know. It wouldn't be possible to get such a sum to-night."

"Certainly not. But to-morrow, if you procure the cash and have it ready, we will put it in the drawer to-morrow night. I think it will be stolen; I want it to be stolen; but I am sure that I will recover it. And now, you are tired out and so am I. With your permission, I will go to bed."

As he was passing along the hallway toward the stairs he encountered Isabel Acton, who came out of the library. She stopped, facing him, directly in the open doorway.

"Have you discovered the Woman of the Mask, Mr. Carter?" she asked, rather facetiously.

"Not quite," he replied smilingly. "She is very evasive."

Isabel drew back into the library, as if inviting him to enter with her, and he did so.

"By the way, Miss Acton," he said, seating himself upon the arm of a chair, while she stood at the opposite side of the table, "I noticed that you were absent from the drawing-room to-night when I asked rather an important question. I think you withdrew just before I asked it, so no blame could attach to you."

"Yes," she replied. "What was the question?"

"I asked the ladies which of them had been to Manhattan to-day—early this morning, in fact."

She smiled into his eyes and said deliberately:

"I left the room purposely to avoid the question, which I knew was coming. I preferred not to be the only one there who would reply to your question in the affirmative. It would have been unnecessary comment in my direction—but that is why I have waited here near the library door to waylay you."

"Indeed!" said Nick, and he swung around and seated himself in the chair. She dropped into one that faced him.

"I went to New York this morning," she said evenly; "quite early it was, too; and I have kept the fact that I did so a secret."

"Indeed!" said Nick again. "Why?"

"If I have kept the fact that I went there a secret, it follows that I do not care to explain it now any more than I did then, doesn't it?" she inquired; and there was a mischievous smile in her blue eyes.

"Are you trying to convince me that you are the midnight burglar of this community, Miss Acton?" asked Nick.

"No; but I am convinced that some one else will try to convince you that I am," she said enigmatically.

"I am afraid that I do not understand you, Miss Acton."

"If I thoroughly understood myself, I would be more explicit. When I do understand somewhat better what I am talking about, I will explain."

"You puzzle me more and more."

"Possibly. I puzzle myself at times. But we are getting away from the subject. The fact remains that I did go to New York this morning, early, and that I kept the matter a secret from everybody. I think that, aside from myself, you are the only person who knows it."

"Then you might have remained in the drawing-room when I asked that question, and have replied in the negative without anybody's being the wiser."

"Certainly."

"Why did you not do so?"

"I preferred that you should know about it at once rather than have you discover it later, and thereby have your suspicions even more greatly roused than they are now."

"I cannot say that they are aroused now; you are altogether too frank for that."

"And also not frank enough; no?"

"Yes."

"I was in New York. I was also at the Hotel York, Mr. Carter. Good night."

She left her chair hastily and started to cross the room toward the door; but Nick leaped forward and headed her off.

"I must ask you to wait a moment, Miss Acton," he said sternly. "You have said either too much or too little. I will not do you the injustice to suppose that you are indulging in a foolish hoax, which has no meaning and no object."

"You mean that you will not accuse me of deliberately lying in order to make sport of you."

"If you prefer that method of expression;" Nick bowed before her, but still kept his position between her and the door.

"Listen," she said, passing back to the chair and seating herself again. "I ride every fair morning. I ride considerable distances. I have a good horse and I like to go alone. My maid brings coffee and rolls to my room at daylight each morning, no matter what the time of year it may be, and then goes back to bed. At this season of the year it is light about four, and so it was soon after four when I started for my ride this morning."

"I see, please," said the detective. "I shall want to ask you some questions presently."

"I may not choose to answer them. However, I left the house this morning soon after four. I did not return until eleven. I had been absent from the house seven hours or nearly that. While I was absent, I went to Manhattan. While I was in Manhattan, I went to the Hotel York. Now, does it not appear as if I was the person who sent those telegrams?"

"It certainly does."

"I did not send them, Mr. Carter. I did not know that they were sent. I know nothing about them, more than you know at this moment; and yet I must have been there, at the place from which they were sent out, at about the time they were given to the messenger, according to the report you received."

"Will you tell me why you were there? Will you tell me what took you there? And, more important still, will you tell me why you have chosen to tell me all about this, now?"

"I will answer the last of your questions. Not the other."

"Well?"

"I have told you because I have supposed that sooner or later you would discover for yourself all that I have told; but discovering it would suggest, naturally, that I am the Woman of the Mask. But I am not the Woman of the Mask, Mr. Carter."

"You are certainly an extremely puzzling young lady," said the detective.

She rose and curtsied, and then resumed her seat.

CHAPTER VI.

A MASKED WOMAN IN THE DOORWAY.

"You have not given me the information without a definite motive," said the detective, after a pause.

"No. I feel a motive. Anyway."

"What was it? What is it?"

"That you should not seriously suspect me."

"I might be more inclined to do that now that you have spoken as you have, than if you had elected to leave things as they were."

"I do not think so."

"Won't you tell me why you went to that hotel early this morning, Miss Acton?"

"No. At least, not at present."

"Will you tell me why you will not inform me about it?"

"I would prefer to say nothing more about it at the present time, Mr. Carter. Will you permit me to leave the room now, if I make another effort?"

"Yes."

She rose and bid him with a nod of good night; but he remained where he was for a long time; until Simpson came into the library to turn off the lights before he locked the house for the night.

"Simpson," said the detective, "you have been in the service of the general for a long time, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. Twenty years."

"So that you now feel quite like one of the family, don't you?"

"Quite so, sir."

"I wonder, Simpson, if you have anything on your mind that you would like to tell me about. You have looked at me one or three times since I came here to-day, which has led me to suspect that you would like to talk with me about the burglar, if you dared to suggest it. Is that true?"

"Well, sir, it partly is and partly it is not. Shall I speak plainly, sir? Will you not regard it as presumption in a servant, if I say what I have in mind to say?"

"Not at all, Simpson; and more, whatever you do say to me I will receive in perfect confidence."

Simpson shook his head.

"I don't care so much about that, sir. It is the fear that you will misunderstand what I have to say that makes me hesitate. I am very much afraid that what I have to tell you will prejudice you against, rather than in favor of, the one I shall speak about. But, on the other hand, if I do not speak, it may be worse."

"What is it, Simpson? Tell me."

"Miss Acton has been in this room with you for some time. I do not know what she was telling you. But I *do* know that she was over in New York on the time you asked about in the drawing-room."

"That is what she was telling me," said the detective drily. "She was saying that very thing. Now, how do you know she was there, Simpson?"

"It doesn't matter, sir, just how I know it. I do know it. I know more still. I know of several circumstances concerning her which would connect her with the robberies that have occurred in the park. It is the fear that you will allow suspicion to light upon her that makes me speak."

"Why do you fear that she will be suspected?"

"Because, as I said once of the gentlemen, that I want to say that I know she is not the Woman of the Mask."

"It strikes me that you are going rather fast, Simpson. Nobody has charged her with being that woman.

So far as I know, nobody has ever suspected her of it. Now, why do you speak as you do?"

"Because I believe that suspicion must inevitably light upon her. I don't want you to suspect her. I *know* she is not the one."

"You have made that statement twice, and each time with peculiar emphasis. Will you tell me how you *know* it?"

"Because on two occasions when there have been robberies by the Woman of the Mask in this neighborhood I personally know that Miss Acton could not have committed them—unless she could be in two places at the same time; two widely separated places."

Nick was thoughtful for a moment. His impression was that here was a man, a servant, who shared Isabel Acton's secret with her, whatever it was. It was rather a startling condition of affairs; and yet, Simpson, in the aspect of a privileged character of the house, might be selected as a confidant by a young woman like Isabel. Simpson was sixty years old, or near that.

"Simpson," he said at last, "what you say, puzzles me. I will be frank with you."

"Yes, sir."

"I have not thought of suspecting Isabel Acton of this affair. Even after she told me what she did, in this room, only a few minutes ago. I still had no thought of connecting her with the Woman of the Mask. But now, what you have to say about it leads me to suspect that she has some definite knowledge of *who is* the woman."

"No, sir. I was afraid of that. But you wrong her; you do, indeed!"

"You seem very positive."

"I am positive, sir. It was the fear that you would discover things which would make you suspect her that led me to speak to you. But it would be all wrong, sir. She is as innocent and as good and sweet and pure and lovely as any young woman who ever came into the world. I know that."

"You are certainly her champion."

"I am, sir. And I always will be her champion as far and near as in my position may venture to be so."

"How old is she, Simpson?"

"Twenty."

"And she came into the family—when?"

"Some after six year three, sir."

"I begin to suspect, Simpson—but no; I will not say that. Tell me about the other young lady."

"I think I have said more now, sir, than I should have done," replied Simpson, visibly freezing in his attitude.

"You have said too much not to say more."

"I have nothing more that I can say."

"What were the two occasions when there were robberies at Calvert Park, when you know Miss Acton to be somewhere else?"

"I think I will say no more, sir."

The detective regarded the servant steadily for a moment. He knew from the attitude of the man that he could not hope for more information from him, at least for the moment. Simpson had said all that he intended to say. He had given the detective to understand that it was within his power to prove an alibi for Miss Acton if he should elect to do so. That was all he cared to say. That was all he could be prevailed upon to say. Nick decided that he would let him go for the present, but that some time in the future if he regarded it as necessary, he would seek an explanation of the present conversation from Isabel Acton herself.

"All right, Simpson," he said. "You can go."

But after Simpson left him he remained for some time buried in thought; but at last he left the room and went quickly up the stairs to the apartment that had been assigned to him.

He had no intention of retiring, however, although he did wish to give the impression that he was going to bed and to sleep like any other occupant of the house.

He turned on several of the lights in his room and busied himself about it as if he were preparing for bed; and after a little he turned off all the lights, threw himself upon the bed—and deliberately rolled across it to the opposite side, where he got upon his feet again, and hastening across the floor to the door, he unlocked and opened it, so that there was a space of about an inch between it and the casing.

If you had been there to ask him why he did it, he could not have told you.

It was not at all likely that the Woman of the Mask, having visited that house the preceding night, would choose to come there again this night. It was not likely, if she was one of the two young women of the household —which Nick was beginning to suspect—that she would select this night, when the detective was in the house, to go upon one of her expeditions, or to roam about at all after others were in bed.

She had never been known to commit one of the robberies too closely upon the heels of another. The least time that had ever elapsed between them was two weeks.

But Nick had met with two rather remarkable experiences already that night. One was in the confession that Isabel made to him relative to the Hotel York; the other was the strange and disjointed confidence of the butler. His real belief now was, that Simpson would make an effort, now that the household was supposed to be sleeping, to communicate with Isabel and tell her what had passed between himself and the detective.

Nick had no idea in what part of the house Isabel's room might be located; but his own was so situated that from the couch of the door already mentioned, he could keep watch of the stairs where they descended to the lower hall. And that, when all is said, was the real reason

why he pretended to go to bed and did not; why he opened the door a crack and watched.

His original purpose was to go out upon the street and roam about, in the vague hope that the Woman of the Mask might be abroad in defiance of his presence among them.

For a long time after he had drawn a chair forward and seated himself by the door, utter silence reigned throughout the house. Nick waited more than an hour without a sight or a sound of any kind to disturb him.

He arose then, and noiselessly lifted the chair in which he had been seated and carried it across the room to the place where he had procured it. Then he returned to the door to close it—and fortunately peered out through the crack he had left, before he did so.

Instantly he was alert; instantly his nerves were strained to accelerate the powers of every sense in his body, for at just the instant he did peer into the hall, a shadow passed swiftly down the stairs.

It had turned the balustrade when he first caught a glimpse of it; and so swiftly and noiselessly did it move, that it was out of sight almost before he realized that he had seen it at all.

He could not have told whether it was made by man or woman, so swiftly did it flit past and out of his range of vision.

But he had already prepared himself to follow and observe whatever he might discover, and with the flitting of the shadow, he pulled open the door, passed out upon the hall, closed the door behind him and latched it without making a sound, and hurried to the stairway himself.

He paused here, for there was not a sound from below; nor could he see anything.

There was a dim light burning in the lower hall; but there was sufficient of it so that he could plainly have discovered any person there, if there had been one.

If he had not been so perfectly assured in his own mind that some person had passed down the stairs, he would have thought it imagination on his part. But he knew it was not that. He was positive that he had seen somebody.

After waiting several moments, and listening, he followed, gliding as swiftly and as silently down the stairs as the shadow had done.

He reached the lower floor and turned toward the rear; and although that end of the hall was dark, he discovered at once that the door of General Hastings' study was ajar and that a bright light was burning inside the room.

With instant decision he started forward toward it; and even as he did so, a figure appeared on the threshold of the brightly lighted doorway, silhouetted against the glare in the room beyond.

And it was the figure of a woman in black, with a mask over her face. The Woman of the Mask.

CHAPTER VII.

MYSTERIES OF THE NIGHT.

Have you ever been driving along a country road in the night—a very dark night, when a thunder-shower was hovering somewhere near at hand, so that vivid flashes of lightning illumined the sky at intervals?

If you have, and have noticed how the flash will light up the entire landscape for an instant, only to leave everything in utter oblivion the next, you will understand something of the effect that the vision in the doorway had upon Nick Carter.

For the light behind the figure went out with the very instant that the figure appeared on the threshold; and so likewise did the light in the hall.

The intense darkness that followed upon the disappearance of the two lights, can only be imagined; but it was absolute.

But the Woman of the Mask had stood in the doorway, framed there, when the lights went out, and without hesitating an instant, Nick Carter sprang forward to seize upon her before she could escape.

He thought he would get her, too. He thought she would not have time to escape him; or, if she retreated into the room behind her, he would be able to follow her. He remembered that there was no way of escape from that room save by that one door.

But he grasped only the empty air.

There was nothing in the doorway when he reached it; nor had he heard a sound of any kind to tell him which way the woman had gone.

He had prepared himself to go outside the house, and if possible, or if the chance offered, to follow anybody who might appear, and so it was that he had his flash-light in his pocket. He had thought that he might have occasion to use it without ever once suspecting that it would come so soon or in the way it had.

The instant he reached the doorway and found that the woman had avoided him, he dashed his hand into his pocket for the light; he found it, produced it, pressed the button and cast the glare of it into the room ahead of him.

She was not there.

He assured himself of this fact by running the stream of light rapidly over every portion of the room. Then he wheeled about and shot the light into the hallway; and standing there in the doorway, he searched every inch of that hall with his light.

Nowhere was there a sign of a human presence—and Nick could not believe that the woman had had time to escape him so entirely.

And yet she had escaped.

At least she was not there. She was nowhere to be seen.

Again he searched the room; again he searched the hall; the result was the same; and as he closed the study

door and turned the key in the lock, for that was the manner in which he had seen the general fasten it.

But then he stopped and opened the door again. Why? Because he suddenly remembered the going out of the light in the front hall. Was there a switch connecting with that light, in the general's study? Not likely.

A search proved that there was not one.

But the light in the hall had been turned off at the same instant precisely as the light in the study. Plainly the woman——

Nick closed the door a second time, very slowly, and he turned the key as he had done before; then he gave expression to the thought that was on his mind.

"It is all very strange!" he told himself. "That woman stood on the threshold of the doorway when the lights went out. *She could not have had access to either one of them.* She could not have reached the light inside the room to turn it off any more than she could reach the one in the front hall, thirty feet away from her. I was about to tell myself that she must have had an accomplice with her, and now it appears that there must have been three persons here to have accomplished all that was done.

"But there wasn't a person in that front hall. I would have seen such a one when I descended the stairs. There was no person in the room beyond the Woman of the Mask, for if there had been, that person certainly could not have gotten out of the room before I filled the doorway with my own body. But the lights did go out—both of them."

All this passed through his mind very swiftly and silently, while he stood there in utter darkness, listening with every sense alert, for a sound to direct him.

But there came no sound at all. There was nothing.

Since he released the button of his light and let darkness shroud the hall again, he had taken one step aside, and since then had stood as still as a statue, waiting.

He believed that the woman must be concealed somehow, somewhere near where he was, and he knew, if she was, she would have to move after a while; at all events, he could match his own endurance against hers.

Then he heard a sound.

It came suddenly, and he recognized it—who would not?

It was nothing less than the closing of the outside door of the house—there were two; an inner and an outer one.

Instantly he bounded forward toward it; and as instantly as he did so, the lights that had been so promptly extinguished a little while before, flared up again.

But he did not stop just then to solve that mystery.

He knew that some person had gone out through that door, and he believed it could only be one person who would do so at that time, and under the circumstances.

The Woman of the Mask, of course.

He pulled the door open as soon as he reached it, and sprang out after her.

It has already been explained that the residences of Calvert Park stood distances apart, with grounds between them, and that each was well back from the avenues and streets.

It was, perhaps, a hundred and fifty feet from the doorstep of the general's house to the sidewalk of the street. The night was dark; but there was a street light less than a hundred feet away, and as the detective leaped out upon the piazza he again saw the figure of the woman he was seeking.

She was already upon the street; she was, in fact, in the very act of vaulting into the saddle of a black horse that stood there as if awaiting her; and the next instant, before the detective could gather himself, the animal had dashed away with the rider safely upon its back.

Nor was there a sound of hurrying hoofbeats upon the asphalted pavement. The animal might have been a phantom horse for all the sound that was given out as it fled away with the Woman of the Mask safely upon its back.

Nick sprang forward as quickly as he could, after the horse; but when he reached the street it was already turning the nearest corner; and when he reached that, the animal with its rider had disappeared.

The detective stopped still in the street and looked ahead of him down that street.

There were lights on either side of it, at intervals, so that he could see a great distance, but nowhere was there an object in sight—other than the trees and fences and other things that belonged there.

He could see to the next corner, several hundred feet away; and he knew that no horse in the world could have reached that and turned it in the length of time he had occupied in coming from the gate to the corner where he stood.

Where, then, had the horse gone? Over the hedge and across lots?

Plainly that was the only way in which it could have escaped.

"It is all very mysterious," he told himself ruefully. "I would have supposed that once in sight of the Woman of the Mask, I would not permit her to escape; but she has done so as easily as if I had remained in my bed. All the same, she came out of that house; out of the general's house. It is my business now, to find out who is missing."

He turned on his heel and retraced his step; and then he remembered that in closing the door after him when he came out, he had locked himself outside the house, for he had no key.

But the doorbell communicated with the butler's room at night, and so he pressed the button at once to summon Simpson.

There was a long wait after that, and he had to punch the button twice more before he heard Simpson approaching; and when at last the butler did peer out through a mere crack in the doorway, he held a revolver in his hand.

"It is I, Simpson," said Nick. "Open the door and let me in."

The butler complied, grumbling. He was sleepy and cross.

"I went out for a little air," said Nick. "I forgot that I had no key. Thank you for admitting me. Here is something for you;" and he pressed a bill into the butler's hand. "By the way, Simpson, who occupies the room directly back of mine?"

"Nobody, sir. It is another guest-chamber."

"How about the room opposite it?"

"The same, sir. A guest chamber."

"Indeed! Where do the members of the family sleep? Where is the general's room?"

"At the southwest corner, sir."

"And where do the young ladies sleep?"

This was what Nick wished to know, and he chose to come at the question gradually; but Simpson answered readily enough:

"Miss Acton has the suite at the southeast corner, sir, directly opposite the general's. Miss Acosta has the one directly above that. Mr. Henry Hastings is on the top floor. He prefers that."

"Thank you. Good night."

Nick went directly to his own room, and there he looked at his watch. The time was already past two in the morning.

Nevertheless, after waiting a few moments, he resolutely crossed the hall to the southeast corner suite and tapped upon the door.

He waited then, and there being no answer, he tapped again, louder than before, but still taking care not to rouse the others in the house. It was not a proper hour for him to be tapping at the door of a young lady's room in a house where he was a guest for the first time, but he was determined to discover if Isabel Acton was in her bed where she should be. He was convinced in his own mind that the Woman of the Mask belonged in that house.

In response to his third summons, a voice answered it from beyond the door, inquiring who was there and what was wanted.

"It is Mr. Carter," he replied. "Will you come down to the library for a moment? It is important that I should speak with you at once."

"Wait," she replied.

So he waited where he was instead of descending to the library, and after a few moments she opened the door softly and stepped outside.

"What is it?" she asked hurriedly. "What has happened?"

She had the air and the appearance of one suddenly awakened from sleep.

"Will you follow me to the library, Miss Acton?" he asked her, without replying to her questions.

"Yes," she said, and followed him. There he turned about and faced her, when he had switched on the lights.

"Miss Acton," he said, with a certain quality of sternness in his voice, "the Woman of the Mask has been in this house to-night. She has just gone out of it. I followed her outside, but I lost her. When I followed her, I was ready to swear that she was—you. I committed the indiscretion of waking you, in order to satisfy myself that she was not—you. Now, I want you to do me the favor to make some excuse for visiting the sleeping-rooms of the other two ladies of this family. I wish to know if they are each in their beds. Will you do that, quietly, or shall I rouse the general and have it done anyhow?"

"I will do it,—certainly," she replied. Then she smiled rather scornfully and added: "I am afraid, Mr. Carter, that the Woman of the Mask is getting on your nerves."

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER SPRINGS A SURPRISE.

A considerable time elapsed before Isabel Acton returned to the library, where the detective was impatiently awaiting her. She looked very beautiful, too, Nick thought even then, dressed as she was in hastily donned clothing, but with her wonderful hair more or less disordered. But her face was flushed and her eyes were sparkling—with the excitement of the adventure, Nick thought.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently.

"All seems to be well," she replied demurely. "There is no one missing from the house, Mr. Carter. Will you tell me what has happened that you should venture to suspect one of us so plainly?"

There was unmistakable sarcasm in her question; there was also resentment, and Nick felt that she had a right to indulge in both; but he told her all, or nearly all, of what had happened and she listened gravely. But at the end she remarked:

"Don't you think, Mr. Carter, that you have perhaps allowed your imagination to play you false?"

She did not wait for a reply, but turned away at once and with a nod, hastened up the stairs and disappeared through the door of her own apartment.

It was half an hour later before the detective left the library; but he presently went to his own room, undressed and went to bed, where he slept soundly till morning.

As soon as breakfast was finished he astonished the others who were gathered around the table by announcing:

"General Hastings, at the risk of offending you, I am going to withdraw from this case."

The general raised his eyes in amazement; the ladies [illegible] Some of them knew very much about Nick Carter, but all had been told that he was never known to acknowledge himself beaten.

"It is quite true," he said, when nobody replied to his announcement. "It will perhaps be some time before the Woman of the Mask ventures to appear again. I think that now, having your manuscript in her possession and knowing how highly you value it, she will confine herself to getting that hundred thousand dollars out of you that has been demanded for its return. You offered me a hundred thousand to get it back for you, and so I think you could not do better than to place the money in the drawer of your desk and—await results. Anyhow, I must ask you to excuse me from further connection with the matter."

General Hastings bowed coldly.

"As you like," he said. "If you will follow me to my study I will give you a check for the services already rendered. I am perhaps justified in stating that I am surprised at your decision."

"You owe me nothing," replied Nick, rising. "With your permission, I will leave at once. I bid you all good morning."

Without another word he turned and left the room; a moment later he was in the street, hastening rapidly away from the house.

He did not know it, but back there in the house he had left, the temper of the old general, which had been restrained under admirable control until the detective had gone, was manifesting itself in truly characteristic fashion; and if there had been any doubt in the mind of any one of the number who listened to that conversation, respecting its genuineness, he dispelled it. They all knew the general in his tempers, and he was now in one of them.

But if, also, they had known Nick Carter better they would not have been so cocksure that he had withdrawn from the case. If Chick, or Patsy, or Ten-Ichi, or one of the inspectors of police had been there to hear Nick Carter resign from that case, he or they would have laughed grimly in their sleeves, knowing well that the detective never took back track on anything of the kind.

Nick had not remained in the library alone after Isabel Acton parted with him, for nothing.

He had realized after those extraordinary experiences of the night, that he must adopt a different course if he hoped to clear up the mystery of the Woman of the Mask.

The social conditions of Calvert Park were such that he instinctive knew it was hopeless to attempt to accomplish anything in secret in that community. He knew that every act of his would be watched and commented upon with ever-increasing interest, and that the news of his movements would be passed from one to another, constantly. He could imagine the telephones ringing and Mrs. This saying to Mrs. That: "What is Mr. Carter doing this morning?" and the reply might be, "He has just taken his second cup of coffee. He is going out presently to look for tracks in the shrubbery," etc.

Nick Carter could not stand for that sort of thing at all.

It would be fatal to all his plans. If he worked at all on this case of the Woman of the Mask, he must do it in secret; *for already he was convinced that there was more of a mystery connected with it than had been imagined.*

And so he chose to resign from the case altogether. Actually to resign. It would be nobody's business if he should take it up later on his own account.

He knew that the news of his disaffection would fly over the wires from house to house as soon as he was gone, and that it would not be many minutes before it was known in every household of the Park that he had resigned.

And that was what he wanted done.

He had risen early that morning. He had visited the stables of the old general. He had taken an unusual interest in the horses, even to the extent of examining their feet with unusual care. One, watching him, would have supposed that he thought of purchasing.

Also he had taken a slow stroll around the grounds, near the hedges, with his eyes fixed upon the ground as if he were in deep thought; and from that visit to the stables and from the excursion around the grounds, he had formed his own conclusions which, for the moment at least, he preferred to keep to himself.

But the result of that morning's work had been to render him all the more determined to adopt the course he had decided upon before he retired; and so it was that his announcement was made at the breakfast table, as soon as all the members of the family were gathered there.

It is not within our province to look back into that breakfast-room after he left it. We could only conjecture what took place there, and that is not worth our while.

We might imagine the old general storming about in anger at the sudden desertion of his colors by the detective, in whom he had placed so much confidence; we might imagine that Isabel Acton looked up demurely with her surprised eyes—but we will follow the detective instead.

He went directly to his own home, arriving there about half-past nine; and he called his first assistant to him the moment he was inside the house.

"Chick," he said, "there is a whole lot more to that case at Calvert Park than I imagined at first. We are going back there to-night, Chick; you and I together."

"Yes?" replied the assistant.

"In the meantime I have resigned. I have thrown up the job—walked out and made everybody mad at me."

"Too much publicity, eh?" asked Chick, who understood thoroughly his chief's methods.

"Decidedly so. When one sneezes, somebody else coughs. They call each other up to tell that it looks like rain, or that there is a cloud in the sky. Gee! I wouldn't live in a community like that if you would present me with a mansion and all that goes with it."

"But all the same you mean that you are going back on the quiet to work out the case?"

"Yes. To-night. But I am forgetting that you know nothing about the affair."

He began then at the beginning and told his assistant of everything that had occurred from the moment of his arrival at the home of General Hastings until he left it that morning, omitting nothing that we already know.

When he had completed the tale, he said:

"Now you know as much about it as I do, Chick, with the exception of what I discovered in the stable and grounds around the house this morning. What do you think of it?"

"I should say," replied Chick, "that one of those two girls—Isabel or Erlina—is the Woman of the Mask."

"Which one?"

"Why, it looks like Isabel to me."

The detective nodded.

"It did look like Isabel," he said. "It does now. It also might be either of the other two just as well."

"What possible object could Mrs. Hastings have in such business?"

"What object could anybody have in such a business? That is not an answer. There is always a motive in the commission of a crime; but the incentive to that motive is as often extremely remote."

"I know."

"The motive here is robbery, pure and simple. You object to the names of these people, because you say there could not be sufficient incentive behind the motive. But I want to tell you right now that one of those three women is the Woman of the Mask."

"Which one—in your opinion?"

"I give it up; but I'm going to find out."

"How?"

"By going back to that house to-night, and every night, secretly, and keeping it up until the mystery is solved."

"Do you mean that you are going inside the house?"

"Certainly."

"You will unmask as the Woman of the Mask yourself, if you are not careful."

"It wouldn't surprise me if I did that very thing before I have done with this case. But anyhow I employed my time profitably after Isabel left me in the library last night; or rather early this morning. I fixed things so that I can get inside and out of that house at any time I care to do so, without anybody being the wiser."

"Tell me about your visit to the stable and the grounds this morning, Nick."

"Well, there isn't very much to tell about that. There are three black horses in the stable, any one of which might have been the one used by the woman last night. I couldn't find a trace of a saddle girth upon the coat of any one of them, but the hostler had already rubbed them, so that is nothing. Around the grounds near the hedge there was nowhere a track of a horse's hoof; but you must not forget that the horse I saw was shod with something to deaden the sound of his footfalls—some sort of pads, probably, which would not leave very intelligible tracks."

Chick nodded.

"There were several spots near the hedge where a horse so shod, or with his feet so protected, might have alighted without leaving any mark. I mean places where the ground is hard."

Chick nodded again.

"While I was inside the stable I took occasion to examine pretty carefully the feet of the horses. On one of them I found what appeared to be marks of straps around the posterns. I called the hostler's attention to them, and he said that he couldn't make them out at all. He thought the horse must rub himself somehow, while standing in the stable. I did not agree with him, but I didn't tell him so. My own conviction is that that was the horse that leaped the hedge last night; that somehow, which cannot now be explained, the woman who rode him managed to get him back inside the stable before I could follow. That then she slipped into the house by a back way—anyhow, Chick, I am going back there to-night, and you are going with me. I am going to find out who that woman is."

"I'm with you all right, Nick. And I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"If you are going to take me with you inside the house, why not rig me up as the Woman of the Mask? If I should happen to encounter the real one, there might be something doing."

CHAPTER IX.

TWO WOMEN OF THE MASK.

During the afternoon of that day, Nick received a call from Cuthbert—the bachelor millionaire, who had confessed to Nick that he was more interested in the woman burglar, the time she called upon him in the night, than he had been in the money she stole from him.

"That was a queer move of yours, Carter," he said, "giving up our case so soon. I have been appointed a committee of one by our people over there, to labor with you. We want you to come back and see the thing through."

The detective shook his head with emphasis.

"Did you ever go hunting for partridges or quail, Cuthbert?" he asked.

"Yes. What has that to do with the case?"

"Well, suppose before you started out to hunt for them, you should send beaters through the woods, shouting and firing guns, and in every way possible telling the birds that you were coming; how many do you suppose you would bag?"

"Not many, to be sure. I see what you mean. We are a set of fools over there. I admit it. But all the same, I wish you would go back and see the thing through."

"Nay, nay," said Nick, laughing. "No, thank you. Besides, there is another reason."

"Is there? What is it?"

"People over there do not tell me all they know. You did not choose to tell me all that you might have done."

"I told you all I *knew*."

"You did not tell me all you suspected."

"Well, what of that? What would be the good of casting suspicions upon some inno——"

"Rats, Cuthbert! That is not an elegant expression and it is not dignified for me to make use of it; but all the same—*rats!*"

"Maybe you'll be good enough to construe—as the Latin professor used to say to me at college."

"You told me that the Woman of the Mask reminded you of somebody, but you would not tell me who it was. I found out later that she reminded you of Isabel Acton, but——"

"On my soul, she did not, Carter!"

"Of whom, then?"

"Well, it was not Isabel. It might have been Erlina, or even——" he stopped.

"Go on. Or even Mrs. Hastings; eh?"

"Yes—if the mere suggestion were not so utterly preposterous."

"Nothing is preposterous."

Cuthbert shrugged his shoulders.

"Then you refuse to return with me?" he asked.

"Decidedly."

"What shall I say to them over there?"

"Tell them for me that the next time they see me entering them they will have no further need of my services. The Woman of the Mask will be known to them by that time."

"All that sounds rather enigmatical, Carter."

"Leave it so, then."

Cuthbert took up his hat to take his leave; but at the door he hesitated.

"Look here, Carter," he said. "I would like to ask you a question."

"Very well, ask it."

"Did you abandon that case because you found out who the Woman of the Mask is, and you don't care to announce your discovery?"

"No. I don't know who she is."

"Is that absolutely so, Carter?"

"I never make statements that are not absolutely so, sir."

"Excuse me. I didn't mean it in that way. Don't you suspect who she is?"

"No. It may be that I suspect *where* she is; but *who* she is, I don't know."

"I wish you would go back with me. The people over there are all at sixes and sevens since you announced that it was more than likely one of the lot who is guilty. The women are looking askance at one another and the young ones will be suspecting their own mothers before long; and the mothers will be suspecting their daughters."

"All right. Let them be their own detectives, then."

Cuthbert was compelled to be satisfied with that, and he took his departure.

Nick smiled, well pleased, when he had gone. He wished to clinch the idea that he had totally abandoned the case, and he believed that now he had done so.

That evening he went to the Hotel York and called for the manager. Through him he found the clerk and others of the employees who had been on duty at about the time the telegram to the general was sent out from there. It proved to be one of the assistant clerks who had rung for a messenger for the woman.

But he had very little information to give on the subject. All that he remembered was the fact that a woman had appeared suddenly and asked him to direct her to the telegraph office of the hotel. He told her that there was none in the building, but that he would call a messenger for her. She asked him to do so, and that was all he remembered about it, save that he had given her blanks upon which to write her messages, and that he was dimly of the opinion that there were two women and a man in the party.

Nick thought that this latter information must be at fault. But he asked a question or two on the point.

"What I particularly wish to know," he said, "is, if there were two women, if either of them wore a riding-habit."

"No," was the decided answer. "I would have noticed such a thing at that hour, I am sure. No; neither of them wore a riding-habit."

"Was the woman who asked you for the messenger, veiled?"

"I don't remember that she was."

"Can you describe her looks? Was she pretty?"

"I think so. I don't remember. There was nothing unusual about her. Our hotel is in a neighborhood where it is handy for people to run into it with such requests. We think nothing of them."

"Are you sure that she was not and is not a guest of the house?"

"Oh, yes, as to that I am positive."

And that was all that the detective could discover from him.

At ten o'clock that night, Nick superintended the preparations for the night's trip. That is, he helped Chick about his make-up; and from his own fortunate view of the Woman of the Mask obtained in the hallway of General Hastings' house, he was able to render the disguise almost perfect.

When Chick was fully dressed in the tight-fitting woman's costume; when the blond wig and the black mask were adjusted, Nick stood a little distance away and surveyed him with admiration.

"You look the part all right, Chick," he said. "If I should discover you now under the same conditions and in the same place where I saw the Woman of the Mask last night, I should not have a doubt that you were she."

They drove to Calvert Park in Nick's automobile. The detective had already selected a convenient place where he could leave it in safety he thought. Nick took the wheel himself, and he drove himself so that they arrived near after midnight, and they left only a short distance to walk to the house of the general.

"Now, Chick," he said, before they left the vehicle, "it is possible that nothing may come of our expedition tonight. It is more than likely that we may have to come here again and again, before our efforts bear any fruit; but I am certain of one thing, and that is that Isabel Acton has business outside of the general's home in the night time—business that she prefers to keep secret. She may not be the Woman of the Mask, but—— Come on; there is no use in conjecturing upon the possibilities of the case."

He led the way around through the street at the side of the house, keeping close to the hedge and so out of view from windows they passed.

Presently they paused under the hedge at the spot where Nick believed the horse had jumped over it; and when they were on the opposite side of it he pointed toward an open space in front of them.

"There is only one place where there is danger that we will be seen," he said. "I will cross it first; you follow at once, as swiftly as you can."

Three minutes later they were at the window of the library, which Nick had fixed so that he could easily open it at any time, and in another moment they stood inside the library together, with the open window safely closed behind them.

The house was as silent as a grave—and as dark, save out in the hall, where the dim light gleamed beneath its red globe—that hall light which had been so mysteriously extinguished the preceding night.

A mantel clock in one corner of the room ticked one as they seated themselves to wait—but wait for what, they did not know.

"I shall leave you here alone," whispered the detective in Chick's ear. "If anything happens, you must rely wholly upon your own judgment."

The detective passed out upon the hall and thence along to the stairway where he slowly and silently ascended to the next floor; and he had just reached it and turned aside—he was, in fact, near the door of the room which he had occupied the preceding night, which was standing open—when he detected a slight noise from toward the southeast corner of the building.

Instantly he stepped out of possible view into the room near him; but he remained so that he could peer outside; and there was light enough through the windows for him to see, dimly, what was going on.

And then a surprising thing occurred. The door of Isabel Acton's room opened slowly, and a figure robed in black stood for a moment upon the threshold.

He could not discover whether she wore a mask or not. He could not determine even the color of the wig she wore, if any were worn at all; he was only conscious that a shadowy form had appeared there and that it was standing motionless in the open doorway.

Fully two minutes must have elapsed before the figure moved at all; and then the door was closed, so silently that Nick could not hear a sound from it, and the dark figure glided along the hall toward him and paused for a moment, where he might have touched her with his hand had he chosen to reach out and do so.

He thought for a moment that she was about to enter that room; but the next she glided away again toward the stairs and descended them rapidly to the ground floor of the house.

Nick was after her instantly, and from the top of the stairs he could see her as she passed beneath the hall light in its red globe.

And then, in that fleeting instant he saw that she did wear a mask and that her hair was coal black. In that one quick view of her, he thought of Erlina Acosta.

But she vanished at once, going toward the rear of the hall, and after a moment he felt assured that she had entered either the study of the general, or the library.

If the latter, then she must already be face to face with Chick.

Instantly he followed her, almost running down the stairs, but still making no sound.

He paused there long enough to reach up and snap out the hall light; and then, from the rear of the building he saw a stream of light flow out from the room which the general called his study.

"That room appears to be the Mecca for the Woman of the Mask," was his thought as he started along the hall toward it.

He heard no sound to warn him of what he was to find, and he supposed that the woman was in that room alone.

and that Chick was still where he had left him, in the library.

But he reached the doorway and looked in. Then he stared with amazement.

Directly before him, in the brilliantly lighted room, facing each other across the general's desk, were two masked figures—two Women of the Mask—and one of them was holding a pistol steadily aimed at the other's heart.

CHAPTER X.

A SECRET PASSAGEWAY.

The surprising part of this discovery was that neither of the women was Chick in his disguise. Chick, all unconscious of what was taking place in the general's study, was still quietly seated in the library, awaiting developments; and all the time the developments were taking place in the room adjoining.

Neither of these two women in masks was Chick.

The detective realized that almost the instant he discovered them.

One of them was the woman he had followed down the stairs—the one with the black hair; the one whom he had decided might be Erlina Acosta.

The other——? Nick shrugged his shoulders a little bit, in his amazement, for the two were so exactly alike, save for one thing, that had it not been for that one thing it would have been impossible to determine which was which if the back were turned to them for a moment.

But that one thing was in the color of the hair—or the wig. Which was it? Hair or wig?

The woman with the pistol was the same one who had descended the stairway directly ahead of the detective. She it was who had black hair. The woman at the opposite side of the desk, although costumed exactly like her companion, even to the texture of the clothing she wore and to the shape of the black mask which entirely concealed her features, had red hair.

Knowing what Nick already did of the women in that house, he would have stated without hesitation, from what he saw now, that this latter one was Mrs. Hastings the general's wife.

But there was still another amazing thing about her attitude.

She was standing at that side of the desk where the drawers were located. One of these drawers had been pulled open in front of her and it was evident that she had just taken something from it, for in her right hand she held a large package of banknotes. In front of her, on the desk, was the general's manuscript.

It was an interesting tableau, and Nick waited with eagerness to discover how it would come to an end.

But it appeared as if neither of the participants had any intention of bringing it to an immediate close.

They remained as Nick discovered them, silently facing each other; one with the pistol held out almost at arm's length and with the muzzle pointed at the heart of the other; the other with her right hand half-raised above the desk, gripping in her fingers the package of money which she had taken from the drawer.

Both were motionless. Each stared at the other unflinchingly. The woman with the bills seemed to be in no fear of the pistol; the woman of the pistol seemed relentless in her attitude.

Neither uttered a word or moved. They might have been graven images or wax figures for all the signs of life that either made.

And then Nick felt a slight pressure upon his arm from behind—Chick's signal that he was at hand, for he had approached without making a sound.

Nick pointed silently through the open door toward the masked women near the table, and his assistant nodded; then Nick reached out and pulled Chick's head down near his own until his lips were against Chick's ear, and he whispered, scarcely breathing the enunciation:

"Go inside, Chick. Surprise them."

Chick nodded again. Then, with a grace of motion that was equal to the part he played, and without making a sound, he left Nick's side and glided forward, across the threshold, into the room where the women still stood as Nick had discovered them. It seemed as if both were afraid to move; as if each knew the other; as if each waited for the other to make the first sign of attack.

So intent were they upon their occupations of doing absolutely nothing, so engrossed were they in staring into each other's eyes, that neither heard nor saw the advance of the newcomer among them.

It was not until Chick had advanced to the desk, so that he could have touched it also, that they saw him, and then they discovered him at the same instant.

The surprise seemed to be about equally distributed between them; and then—*that same thing that had happened the preceding night, happened again—the lights went out.*

How they went out or why they went out as they did, it was impossible to tell.

Neither of the two women had moved at all, apparently; and yet the three electric lights over their heads went out as suddenly as only electric lights can, and left the room in darkness that was all the deeper by contrast with the light that had just illumined the scene. Nick knew then that it was time to act.

He knew—or thought he knew—that there was no way in or out of that room save through the open doorway before him, and he was at the moment standing within reach of it.

His first act was to step quickly forward, and to fill the doorway as completely as he could, with his own body, thus barring any person from leaving the room—unless, indeed, it could be done by assault upon himself.

His next move was to draw one hand into a pocket in search of his portable light—and to discover that for once he had gone away without it.

But instantly he remembered that there was a key always in the lock of the study door, and that it was kept on the outside; so he reached out for the door, grasped it, stepped inside the room and pulled the door shut after him, and then quickly turned the key in the lock and withdrew it.

And as he did that, feeling that he was now master of the situation, the lights suddenly flared up again, as they had done the preceding night, flooding the room with brilliant light and revealing—not at all what Nick had expected to see.

Chick still stood near the desk, in exactly the position he had assumed before the lights went out—but that was all.

The others had disappeared. The two women were gone. There was not a trace of them left, and there was no visible means of their leaving the room.

Yet, they were gone. They were not there.

The woman with the pistol, the woman with the money, both Women of the Masks, had disappeared as effectually as if they had dropped through the floor into the cellar beneath.

And the pistol and the money had gone with them, too.

The drawer of the desk was still open; the manuscript belonging to the general was still upon the desk where the woman who had held the money had evidently placed it before she pressed herself of the earth.

But that was all.

"Well, I'm——" Chick began, but stopped.

"So am I," assented Nick, "whatever it was you were about to say. But I am not sure that it would have sounded appropriate while you are arrayed in that costume."

"Where did they go, Nick? How did they get out of this room?"

"They went out, of course. As to how they did it, we will have to look for an answer to that question. It does not appear at the present moment, although it proves that there is a secret way in and out of this room. I had already suspected it, but now I am sure of it, of course."

"They must have both known about it, Nick."

"Certainly."

"They must both be in the same boat about the Woman of the Mask business."

"It would certainly appear as if they are."

"Then why were they at daggers drawn?"

"You mean pistols drawn, lad."

"What were they fighting about?"

"The money probably. Both seemed to want it, although that was not the impression I received when I first discovered them."

"What was that impression?"

"Why, it struck me that the one with the black hair had discovered the other one in the act of helping herself to the money and was trying to prevent it."

"That was the way it hit me, too. But now——"

"Now, I think we must both decide that each of them wanted it, and therefore neither wished the other to get it. Did you hear any sound, Chick, after the lights went out? Anything that suggested the moving of a panel or an article of furniture, or of the opening of the secret door through which they must have made their escape?"

"Not a sound."

"Something must have moved."

"Something did move. They moved."

"Our energies must be devoted to finding out how they escaped from this room; or, no, Chick; I am going to leave you to do that. Open this door and let me out; then lock it after me. While I am gone, you search for the secret door. When I return I will rap softly three times for you to admit me."

"Tell me what you are going to do while you are away, Nick."

"I am going to do a very improper thing, but I shall not do it with anything but a very proper motive."

"What is it?"

"I am going to visit several of the rooms in this house quietly, to see who is absent from their beds. That is all. I am going to play burglar in earnest."

"But to what purpose?"

"There are, or should be, three women in this household. The matron of the house is scarcely older than the other two. Of those three, two should be missing from their beds at this moment. I am going to find out which two are missing. Let me out. You know how to search for secret doors as well as I do, and will be quite as successful as I might be. You will have discovered it before I return."

"I will try to do so."

"I know now why that telegram to the old general told him to leave the money in that drawer from which the manuscript was stolen," mused the detective aloud, while he hesitated before going from the room.

"Why?"

"For the very good reason that the Woman of the Mask knows of the secret way into and out of this room. It was a good place for her to come after it."

"But, Nick, do you suppose that there could be such an entrance without the knowledge of the owner of the house?"

"No; I do not. The general knows about it all right. He probably had it made—had it put there himself when the house was built."

"Then why——"

"Don't you see that he amiably supposes that he is the only living person who does know about the secret entrance? He is just old enough to deceive himself in a manner like that. However, all that part of the mystery will be cleared up later on. It is not important now. The important thing is to find the secret way, and to find out where it leads. I will tap on the door three times when I return. But, Chick?"

"Well?"

"If you should happen to be interrupted—if somebody in the house should hear you and surprise you in any way, don't forget that you are playing a part; don't forget that for the time, at least, you are the Woman of the Mask."

"I won't."

"Then, if all is clear and if necessary, come to the outside of [illegible]; I will enter there. Now, let me out."

A moment later Chick was alone in the general's study, searching for the secret passage, and Nick Carter was swiftly ascending the stairs, determined to find which of the women who lived in that house were missing from their rooms.

CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERY OF THREE WOMEN.

The detective had not forgotten that the Woman of the Mask whom he had seen and followed down the stairs had appeared to issue from the suite of rooms that he knew were occupied by Isabel Acton. It was, therefore, to be presumed that Miss Acton was not in her room. Nevertheless, Nick determined to leave nothing to guesswork, but to make his investigation in a thorough manner throughout.

But before entering the room he had recourse to one more precaution which he deemed necessary and which he deemed important—and for which he had come there thoroughly prepared.

He crossed the hall to the room he had occupied the preceding night, passed inside and closed the door after him.

Then, without turning on a light, had made some rapid alterations in his appearance, so that when he stepped forth again he was as thoroughly disguised as if he had taken an hour in its preparation.

He now looked the part of the genuine burglar of the "jimmy and dark-lantern" sort; that is, as they are popularly supposed to appear.

He had slapped an iron-gray, close-cropped wig on his head; he had donned a false beard, which purposely showed that it was false; he had pulled down the brim of his hat so that it shaded his eyes; he had turned up the collar of his coat after reversing that garment, and he had tied a string around each of his trousers legs. If you have any doubt about creating an almost perfect disguise in that manner, try it. You will find that it will pass.

He had come to the house with rubber sneakers on the soles of his shoes, so he could glide about as noiselessly as a ghost, and as it was that he appeared to be nothing more than a passing shadow when he crossed the hall to the door of Isabel's suite of rooms.

He had expected to find the door unlocked; to his astonishment it was securely fastened, and, what was still

more remarkable, the key was on the inside of the lock, still in the door.

But he had his burglar's forceps with him, and to seize the key with them and turn it was but the work of a moment.

Then he passed inside.

He found himself in what was the parlor or sitting-room of the suite; beyond that, in the adjoining room, there was a dim light burning.

Nick could see that it was the bedroom, and he advanced to the doorway and stood upon the threshold while he surveyed the apartment.

He was loath to intrude further upon the sanctity of that room, particularly as he saw at a glance that the bed was occupied.

He had so confidently expected to discover that Isabel was absent, that this amazed him anew: and as if to make assurance doubly sure that it was Isabel in person she was lying so that he could plainly see her features where the glimmer of the night-lamp shone upon them.

There was no doubt that it was Isabel.

Nick turned away upon the instant he made the discovery. He did not care to have her open her eyes and discover him.

In a moment he was back again in the hallway, with the door once more locked against intrusion: but there he paused for a moment.

"I must suppose now," he thought to himself, "that the woman I saw first was Erlina Acosta—as I supposed her to be when I saw her pass under the light at the bottom of the stairway. Evidently she had entered this room in the same manner that I did it—by using a pair of burglar's forceps—and she came out and locked the door after her as I have done, just at the moment that I discovered her. That is about the size of that."

He remembered that the suite occupied by Erlina was located directly above Isabel's rooms, and he hastened to the stairs which led to the floor above, mounted them, and presently found the door he sought.

Here the way was not barred against him. The door was not locked, and he smiled grimly when he made the discovery. It would seem that his conjectures were correct thus far.

Inside, he found the suite to be on the same plan as the one under it. Save for the furnishings, the rooms were exactly the same; and as in Isabel's rooms, a night lamp was burning dimly in the sleeping-room.

But that was not what made him start so with surprise when he stood upon the threshold.

The bed was occupied; and as in the other case, it was plainly occupied by the person who belonged there.

Here, also, as before, it seemed as if the occupant of the bed had composed herself to sleep after purposely assuming a position from which her features could be quite plainly seen in the glimmer of the night lamp.

It was Erlina; there was no doubt of that.

Her beautiful, mobile face, with its olive-tinted skin, was turned half-toward him. The blue-black hair was clustered in a mass about her head and over the pillow, appearing all the blacker by contrast.

But now Nick was not in such haste to leave as he had been in that room below. Now he determined to make sure that the woman on the bed was a real woman and not a wax figure or a dummy of some kind that had been fixed up for the occasion.

Accordingly he stepped softly across the room, nor stopped until he stood close beside the bed and bent over the sleeping young woman.

But he knew to a certainty then.

He could distinguish her soft breathing. He could dimly see the rise and fall of the covers as she inhaled and exhaled her breaths.

She was sleeping calmly, peacefully, innocently.

Nick turned away almost ashamed of himself that he had looked upon the sanctity of that room; but then he recalled to mind the praiseworthy purpose of his visit, and he found sufficient excuse for his action in that.

But when he was again in the hallway he paused.

"I wonder," he was thinking, "if I am reduced to the belief that one of the servants of the house is the Woman of the Mask, after all? But no; that cannot be true. Anyhow, there were two women down-stairs. There must, then, be two burglars who work together; who make-up so exactly alike that it is difficult to tell one from the other. One of them comes from this house and the other from the outside. But now, for the one inside the house, I have only the mistress of the house left."

He knew where to find the apartments occupied by the wife of the general, and now he sought them.

Again he discovered that the door into the hall was not locked: again he experienced no difficulty in entering where he sought to enter; and again when he approached the sleeping-room of Mrs. Hastings he saw that she was not missing from her accustomed place.

She was there plainly enough. He saw her and recognized her—and he withdrew instantly, passing out again upon the hall and silently making his way down the stairs, the most thoroughly puzzled detective you could imagine.

When he reached the ground floor of the mansion, he entered the library and threw himself upon one of the chairs there, for he was not ready yet to seek Chick.

But he had scarcely assumed the seat when he bounded to his feet again and started for the stairs a second time.

"It all resolves itself back again to Isabel Acton," he muttered, for he was beginning to feel resentment over the puzzling condition of affairs. "Anyhow, I am going to have another look in upon her. If she was expecting me the first time and was prepared for my coming, it will not be so this time. She will suppose that I am convinced."

The door was apparently in the same condition as he left it; the key was still in the lock, inside the door; but when he sought to turn it with the burglar's forceps, it refused to turn.

Wonderingly he tried the door. It opened at his touch. Then he stepped softly inside and closed it after him.

The rooms appeared the same; the light still burned dimly in the room beyond, and he stepped to the threshold of the door between the rooms.

The bed was vacant!

"So," he mused. "Isabel was playing possum, was she?"

A hurried glance around the room assured him that she was not there; that she was not merely hiding from him. It assured him that she had gone out; probably had arisen as soon as he departed on the occasion of his first visit.

There was an electric switch beside the door where he stood, and now he turned it on, thus flooding the room with light.

"I will know something about Miss Isabel before I leave this room," he muttered. "If she returns before I am prepared to leave here, well and good. We may as well have it out now as at any time in the future."

No man knows how to make a thorough search of a number of articles in that room better or in less time than Nick Carter.

With every light in the room turned full on, it was not long before he had gone through wardrobes and dresser, trunk and bureau, entirely to his satisfaction; but not to his satisfaction, either, since he found nothing that he should not have discovered there.

There were no disguises there; there was no wearing-apparel for the Woman of the Mask. There were no masks; no wigs; no impedimenta of any kind such as she would have used in representing the character of that mysterious burglar.

When Nick had satisfied himself thoroughly as to these points, he coolly seated himself in a chair just inside the door from the hall, and having turned off the lights so that the rooms appeared the same as when he entered them, he determined to await Isabel's return.

As he placed himself he was entirely in shadow. A huge black walnut cabinet rose almost to the ceiling beside him, and he half-leaned against it while he awaited the return of Isabel.

But while he waited, he suddenly was conscious that the cabinet was moving—or had he dozed and slipped along the side of it?

No; it moved; and he almost held his breath while he drew back as closely against the wall as he could, and waited.

The cabinet—the opposite side of it from Nick—swung out slowly into the room. There was not a sound from it, and Nick made none. He preferred to await developments.

They came swiftly enough.

When the cabinet had opened quite wide enough from the wall to admit of the passage of an ordinary person, it began to swing shut again, and after a moment it disclosed the figure of the Woman of the Mask, standing quite still a few feet away from Nick.

She was standing with her back toward the detective; standing in the attitude of one who is listening intently. The light in the room was very dim; almost nothing at all, it will be remembered, for since Nick turned off the electric switch there was only the night-lamp in the sleeping-room adjoining.

But he could see the outlines of her figure plainly enough, and without awaiting the opportunity to study her closely, he stepped quickly forward and seized her by the arm.

He had seized, as he supposed, a woman who possessed only a woman's strength. What was his amazement, therefore, when she easily wrenched herself free from his grasp and leaped away from him.

But he followed her with a quick bound, and this time seized the arm with a grip that would not relent; and then——

Then he let go again, for the face that was half-grinning into his was the face of Chick.

What might have been said between them at that moment, if there had been no interruption, we will never know. When Nick would have spoken, he discovered that the walnut cabinet was swinging into the room again; and instantly he resolved what to do.

There was no time to utter a word, but with a quick push he sent Chick reeling to the center of the room, while he huddled his own person behind the cabinet, in the corner, where he had first concealed himself.

And as he did so, Isabel Acton stepped from behind the cabinet into the room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WOMAN WITHOUT THE MASK.

It was the second time that two Women of the Mask had confronted each other that night, although this time it was not the same two. At least, one of them was different, for one of these was the third one who had intruded upon the other two.

She who entered the room last was unmistakably Isabel Acton, for she wore no mask, although she carried that useful article in her hand; but she dropped it to the floor the instant she discovered that she was not alone, and with a quickness that was astounding she raised the same hand to the level of her shoulder and pointed a revolver at Chick—Chick, whom she evidently believed to be another woman.

But Chick was as quick as she was.

When the revolver was raised so that it pointed at him, he stepped forward and seized it. The next instant he had wrenched it from her grasp—and at that instant Nick Carter reached up over his head and turned on the electric switch that was there.

Isabel must have heard the click of the switch; she must have known that still another person was in the room with them, but she made no sign that she did know. Instead, she remained her attitude before Chick, apparently unmoved by the sudden appearance of the light or by the fact that her weapon had been snatched from her.

"Who are you?" she demanded of Chick.

"For the present, I am the Woman of the Mask," replied Chick, with a chuckle. "There is no need to ask who you are, I suppose."

Isabel paused.

"You are a man!" she exclaimed.

"I have that distinguished honor," replied Chick; and he bowed.

Isabel shrugged her shoulders.

"Your disguise is perfect," she said, and one might have thought that she was paying an idle compliment.

"Yes. I supposed it was."

"Are you Nick Carter?" she demanded.

"No."

"Who are you, then?"

"The Woman of the Mask."

"Don't be silly. You are not even a woman. Where is Nick Carter?"

"He is, at the present moment, standing directly behind you."

Like lightning she wheeled; but Nick caught her as she turned, and he held her at arm's length, looking into her beautiful face sternly.

"Did you suppose, Miss Acton," he asked slowly, "that I really intended to abandon this case, as I said I would do? Did you suppose that I could leave a mystery like this one unsolved, once it was presented to me? Hardly that. When I followed you out of the house last night and saw you leap upon the horse and escape; when afterward I determined that you had jumped the hedge with him and so had managed to return to the house before I did; when——"

He paused, for he discovered that she was laughing.

"I did none of those things last night, Mr. Carter," she said. (Nick had pulled off the wig and whiskers he had worn and had otherwise restored himself to his natural appearance.) "I am *a* Woman of the Mask, yes; but as I told you before once upon a time, I am not *the* Woman of the Mask. It seems very strange that after all I have told you about the probability of suspicion being turned against me, you should find me 'with the goods,' as you might express it. But I will tell you exactly how that happened, whether you choose to believe or not. I have known for a long time that the Woman of the Mask belongs in this house, and also a long time ago I determined to discover her identity, if I could. Last night, I assure you, I was not out of my bed until you called me from it. To-night I was sleeping quietly when I awoke suddenly with a start, convinced that some person had entered my room. I sprang from my bed and turned on the lights. There was no one here. It instantly occurred to me that the woman burglar was about again.

and that she was in the house. I have, as you see, a disguise exactly like hers—that is, it is like hers has been described to me often enough. I had it made some time ago, believing that one night I would be able to confront her. You must know why; if you do not know now, you will know presently."

"Go on," said the detective.

"I believed that she was in the house. I believed that if she were here I could find her. I think I know who she is, but I wished to be very sure, indeed, before I offered to betray her to others. I believed that I could save her. Well, I got into this dress as quickly as I could, I seized this mask"—she stooped and raised it from the floor—"and hurried out at the door. There is a secret entrance to the general's study, and I have reason to believe that it is known to the woman. I believed that the study would be the most likely place to find her if she was about the lower floor of the house. Do you follow me?"

"Quite so. Go on, please."

"When I entered the study I found that she had indeed been there, for the secret entrance was standing wide open. It leads out upon the grounds, but after I got outside I could see nothing of her, and so I passed around the corner of the house to another secret entrance"—she pointed toward the cabinet—"that one, and opened it intending to return directly here to this room. But an impulse seized me to have one more look into the study, and I hastened back again. There was nothing there, so I returned, and came here. Came here, to find—you two. Now, will *you* be good enough to tell me what it all means?"

"Miss Acton, haven't you been out of these rooms before to-night? Before the time you have just described?" asked Nick sternly.

"On my honor, *no*."

"It was I who entered your room an hour ago. I came here to see if you were here."

"Oh!" she could say no more. She was visibly shocked at this.

"You must tell me, now, if you expect me to believe you, and to aid you, who it is whom you believe to be the Woman of the Mask? Who it is you are trying to save from herself?"

"Erlina. I will tell you everything now. I owe it to myself. I know that it is Erlina. I have seen her, and I believe, recognized her."

"But I went to her room, also, and I found her sleeping, as I found you."

"Then she fooled you as you supposed I had fooled you."

"And down below, earlier, I saw two women—I do not refer to Chick's disguise now—two Women of the Mask. One of them had a package of money in her hand; the other held a pistol. The pistol was pointed at the one who held the money; and then the lights went out, and they disappeared—through that secret entrance to the study. Chick, did you find that entrance, all right? But I know you did."

"Yes. I found it. And I found this other one, when Miss Acton left the way open for me. I saw her go away and leave it, after she had opened it, and I thought I would come inside and wait for her. You know the rest of that."

Nick turned again toward Isabel.

"This house seems to be a honeycomb of secret passages and entrances," he said. "Are there others than these two that I know about?"

"Yes," she replied. "Secret passages, secret entrances and exits, secret panels, and secret hiding-places are my guardian's hobby. When he built this house, he had them constructed all over it. I have always supposed that I was his only confidant concerning them—until I discovered that some of them were known to the Woman of the Mask. There was an old character—a priest or a friar of the Middle Ages, who was renowned for building secret hiding-places, and the general has studied everything there is to find about him. When he erected this house he filled it with concealed closets, hiding-places, doors, panels, and stairways."

"Is there a secret passage which communicates with Miss Acosta's rooms?"

"Yes; there is at least one, sometimes more, to every room in the house; that is, to every suite of rooms."

"Come, then," said Nick, with determination. "I will ask you to conduct us to Miss Acosta's rooms. You may enter in advance of us and prepare her for our coming; but I am determined to have an end to this mystery to-night. Will you come with us now, and show us the way?"

She hesitated only an instant; then, with a deep sigh, she exclaimed:

"Yes. Come."

Nick pressed off the electric lights. Then he stepped

to the door and threw it open—but the instant he did so he paused and drew back quickly, for directly ahead of them, gliding swiftly around the balustrade toward the second flight of stairs, was the Woman of the Mask; not the one with the black hair who had held the pistol pointed toward the other who had the money, but she of the red hair and the package of money.

Instantly Nick darted after her, leaving his companions to follow as they could or might; and it was not until he was at the bottom of the stairs and the figure he was pursuing had reached the top of them, that Nick was discovered.

But then the noise of the pursuit was heard, and the masked figure turned for an instant; the next, she had leaped over the last stair and had turned toward the front of the house swiftly.

But Nick was well started now—and, more than that, an accident assisted him in a manner he had not expected. The fleeing figure tripped upon the folds of the black skirt and fell to the floor and then, before the mask could arise, the detective was there.

His very first act was to seize the mask and to tear it from the face of the person he had seized, who now, with amazing strength, had struggled to an upright position, and was putting up a desperate fight; and at the same instant Isabel, who was following, turned on the lights.

But already the struggle was over with; already the captured mask had handcuffs for decorations; and it did not need the sharp cry which Isabel gave to reveal the identity of the captive.

The mask, being torn aside, had revealed the face of Henry Hastings, the general's son; Henry Hastings, slight of figure, feminine in mannerisms, agile of movement, arrayed in a black, close-fitting feminine costume, and with a red wig covering his short, black hair. The mystery was solved and the Woman of the Mask was discovered.

It only remains for us to explain as briefly as possible, the few remaining mysteries connected with this rather remarkable affair. Henry Hastings was a gambler; and he was several other things of which his father did not approve. The result was that although the son was past forty years old, the old general had contracted his income until it was very small; much too small for the elder son's needs; and the result of this was that he resorted to theft. He had taken part in private theatricals often, and frequently played feminine rôles. This suggested to him the idea of the Woman of the Mask.

Bad as he was, Erlina Acosta loved him. When she discovered that he was a thief, she loved him, none the less, and she, to save him, had adopted the same sort of disguise to follow him about and to prevent him, whenever she could accomplish it, from committing the crimes he had planned; and Isabel, having once discovered the disguise of the Woan of the Mask in Erlina's rooms in her absence, had determined that it was the latter who was the criminal, and so she had resorted to the same course to save Erlina; and so it was that the complications came about which so greatly puzzled the detective.

Two more things to explain, and we have finished.

When Isabel was starting on her ride that morning after the robbery of the manuscript, she saw Erlina leave the house secretly, and she followed her; followed her directly to the Hotel York, where she lost her, and was obliged to return, having accomplished nothing. But when all the stories were told, it came out that Erlina had followed Henry from the house, having heard him say that he was going to New York early in the morning; and it was Henry, disguised as a woman, who sent the two telegrams from the hotel—with the result that we already know.

As for the turning off and on of the lights, there were concealed switches as well as passages about the house. One of these could be worked from beneath the desk in the study. There was another in the passageway that led outside; and this was nothing more than an elevator arrangement which worked by a spring and which lowered the section of the floor on which the desk-chair stood.

As for the black horse, with its rubber-shod feet, that was another arrangement of Henry Hastings, and by leaping the hedge and disposing of the horse, he had only to make his way to his own room by the secret passage from the outside, and he was safe.

It is worthy of record that the old general paid all the losses that had been sustained through the wrongdoings of his son, and succeeded in hushing the matter up as his friends. The son was sent away across the water.

THE END.

The next number (430) will contain "The Masked Woman's Duel; or, Nick Carter Serving a Subpœna."

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